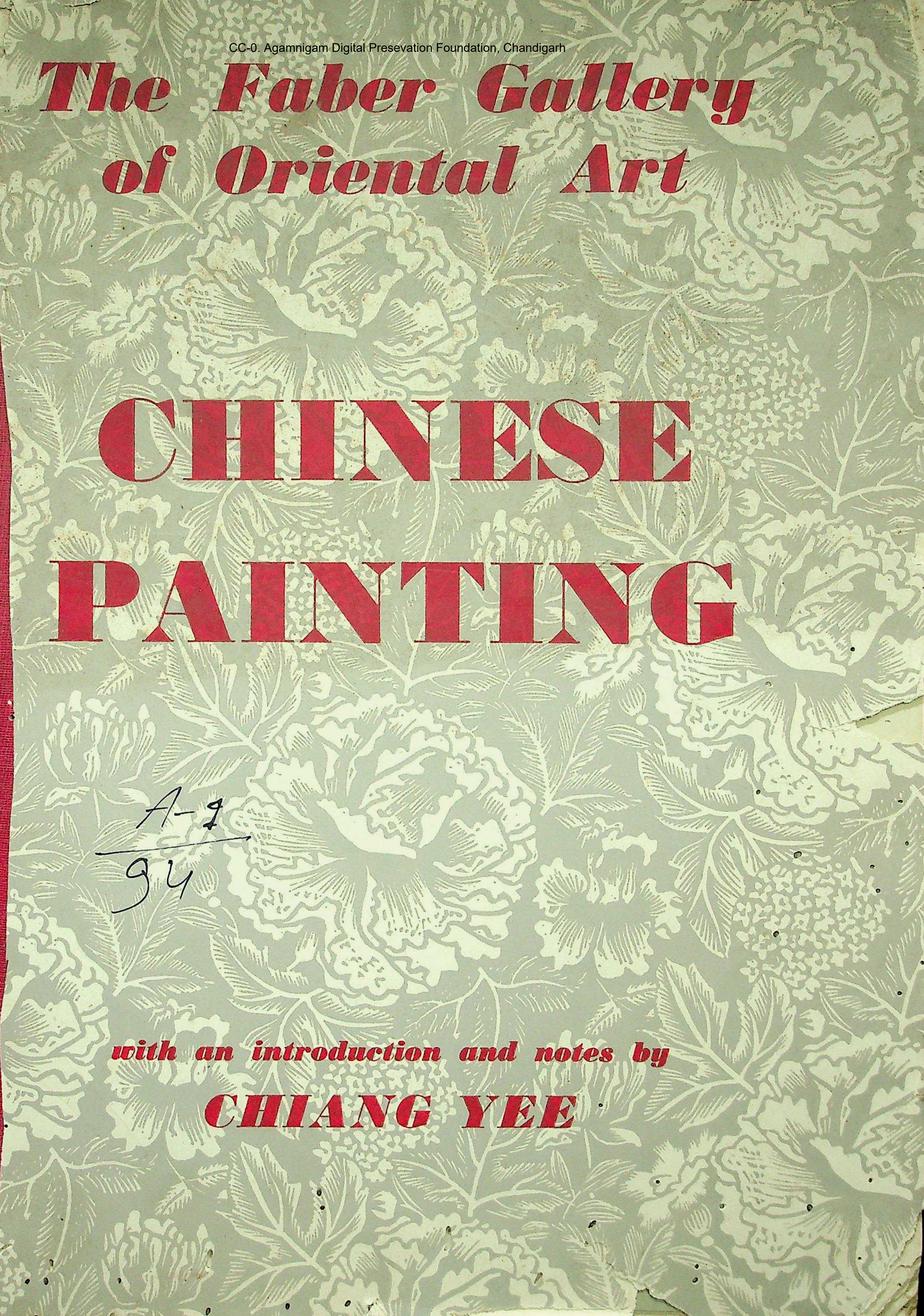

The Faber Gallery of Oriental Art

CHINESE PAINTING

with an introduction and notes by

CHIANG YEE

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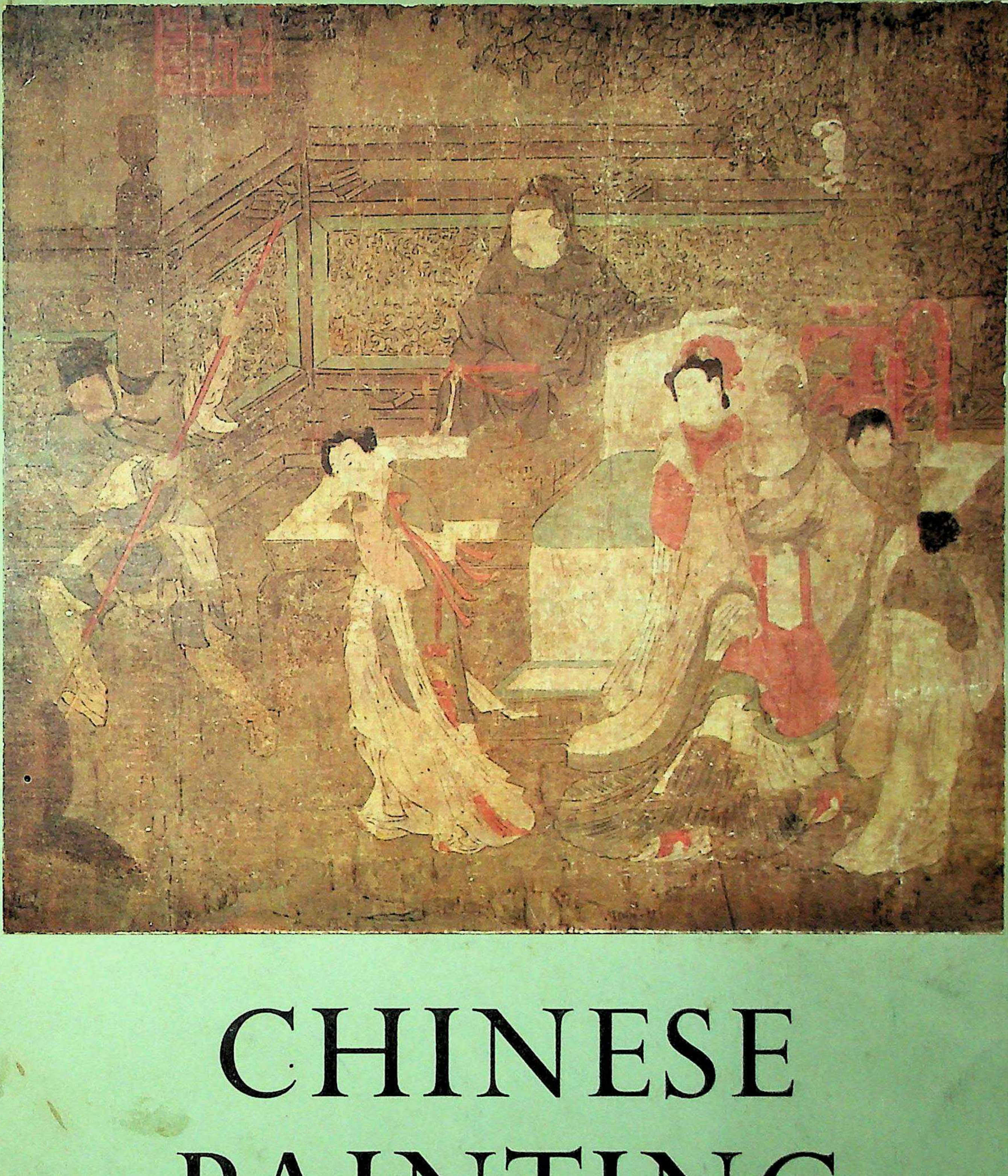

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The British Book Depot,
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with an introduction
and notes by
CHIANG YEE

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CHINESE PAINTING

by Chiang Yee

Chinese painting has been appreciated and written about in the West for the last four or five decades. The enthusiasm of many Western scholars and art-connoisseurs for it, their continuous study and warm interpretation of it in their own languages, have raised it to a place of importance alongside European pictorial art, and have done away with the conception of Chinese art as being on the bric-à-brac level. A Chinese masterpiece by its own merit has aroused the same regard for beauty and for artistic value as its European counterpart does. Nevertheless, they are distinct. This short introduction will endeavour to show how the distinct nature of Chinese painting arose and to clear the way for a keener and deeper appreciation of it amongst those who still find it puzzling.

The course Chinese painting has followed must be ascribed to the three main traditional philosophies in China, two of which, Confucianism and Taoism, were native, and the third, Ch'an Buddhism (or what the Japanese call Zen Buddhism), was imported from India. Naturally the native philosophies sprang from the outlook developed by daily life, each of the two stressing particular aspects of this outlook. China's situation in the Temperate Zone with vast regions of fertile plains made life comparatively easy for the ancient Chinese when they were nomads. As a result the early Chinese were a people of easy disposition, detached, indifferent, rather self-centred, and not adventurous. Very few of them made contact with the sea. Instead, they were familiar with the high mountains and big rivers which they could not avoid seeing in their wanderings. But as they had no need to overcome these, they simply worshipped them. The regard between man and man was no greater than that between man and any other type of creature in nature, except that men were specially concerned for their offspring.

Confucianism, which has dominated Chinese life for more than two thousand years, is based essentially on the family system. In the lifetime of Confucius, some 2,500 years ago, China's population was already big, and the country had become a ceaseless battlefield between feudal princes and self-indulgent warriors. Confucius witnessed such endless suffering among the people that to restore peace he evolved his doctrine of Chung Yung or The Middle Way. His teachings concentrated on making life peacefully tolerable rather than restlessly intolerable. Following the human instinct of love for kith and kin he stressed the importance of family relationships and of order in the family. This he called The Moral Law. Everyone was to cultivate The Moral Law and when all had done so and all families were in order, the country would naturally be at peace and the people would not suffer.

In one word, Confucianism is a plain, straightforward principle of social reform and governmental administration based on sound ethics and remarkable humanism. Confucius did not see his principle in practice in his life-time, but about three hundred years after his death, that is about the second century before Christ, after another long period of stress in Chinese history his teachings were adopted as the guiding light for Chinese life. Unfortunately the early enthusiasts interpreted them in an extreme and rigid fashion in their desire to put everything right at once and so Chinese life became very *formal* and code-ridden in the family unit as well as in society.

Confucius was in no sense a religious leader. He was a simple man, who denounced the fallacy of power and the folly of wealth. There was no spiritual aspect in his teachings. His disciples and the early Confucianists made no attempt to glorify his life. No myths and legends grew up round his name. Therefore, he and his teachings had little *direct* influence on the early development of Chinese painting as compared with the mighty influence of Christianity and the radiant figure of Christ on its European counterpart. The rigidly regulated *formal* life of Chinese society was not stimulating to artistic imagination, and the artist was as bound by The Moral Law as were the other members of the community. Such exuberance as is shown in Da Vinci's grotesque heads, Hogarth's satiric pieces or Daumier's caricatures could not appear in Chinese pictorial art. Art is essentially the expression of *emotion*, but Confucianism made all Chinese more or less emotionless on the surface, if not in the inner mind. In addition, the early Confucianists relying on The Moral Law stressed the necessity for covering the human body. Nude painting was therefore impracticable and outside the ancient Chinese aesthetic concept. Life drawing from the nude has never been included in the training of Chinese artists.

However, being human, the Chinese have had as much interest in man as any other race. Figure painting was the first development of Chinese pictorial art, and not surprisingly was used in the service of Confucianism. The earliest example in existence is Ku Kai-chih's *Admonitions of the Imperial Preceptress to the Ladies of the Palace* (British Museum. Plate I shows a small portion of this Confucian subject). Ku Kai-chih was a great artist of the fourth century. By his time, Chinese figure painting seems already highly developed. But it soon came more or less to a standstill owing to the restricted freedom for the expression of emotion and of body-movement under Confucianism.

The second native philosophy, Taoism, has, on the other hand, exercised a positive influence on Chinese painting. Taoism owes its origin to Lao Tzu, whose principle centred on Tao or The Way in the sense of The Eternal Law of Nature. Lao Tzu, who was Confucius' contemporary but older, found Confucius' principle of restoring peace by regulating life within The Moral Law futile. His philosophy went deeper, calling people to see The Secret of Life in nature as a whole, and to identify themselves with the multitude of other creatures in THE ETERNAL LAW OF NATURE. Every individual should return to his original natural state of being and maintain the integrity of his soul in his own place in the rhythm of life of nature, without the desires which inevitably lead to strife. The out-and-out Taoist would develop the original qualities of indifference and detachment to the full.

Taoism's interpretation of man as a small unit in the whole of creation counterbalanced the over-emphasis laid on man and his conduct in society by rigid Confucianism and came to the rescue of the Chinese soul. Artists began to find their inspiration in other subject-matter; birds, beasts, insects, fishes, flowers, trees, rocks, mountains and rivers. Human figures by degrees came to play only a similar or even a subsidiary part in the long history of Chinese painting, whereas in all ages they dominate European painting.

However, through Buddhism Chinese figure-painting did flourish for a period. After two hundred years of Confucian domination, the Chinese mind was to some extent moulded into the Confucian pattern, yet there were always rebels. In peace, those with power and wealth dreamed of some wonderful paradise where they could dwell for ever and enjoy life in divine ways. In turmoil, those who endured mental and physical suffering sought also some wonderful paradise where they could set their soul and mind at rest, disregarding bodily discomfort and ill treatment. Indian Buddhism provided for both.

It is recorded that Emperor Ming-ti of Later Han dynasty of the first century dreamed one night of a huge golden image of Buddha in the West and decided to send officers in search of the 'Hsi-fan-Lo-tu' or 'Western Happy Land' where Buddha lived. Owing to the very arduous journey from China to India in those early days, probably none of the officers reached the destination for which they set out, for very little result of their search came to light. China had long been at peace and Indian Buddhism was only a rumour at that time. However, from the beginning of the third century to the beginning of the seventh century the Chinese people were again in the midst of strife almost incessantly. Soon the Indian Buddhist religion was ardently accepted by many Chinese and spread rapidly among the masses of the people. Within these five hundred years many Indian Buddhist monks brought replicas of Buddha's image and his Paradise made in stone, metal and other materials to China, while a few Chinese managed to reach India to see the originals. During this period Chinese art took a new and revolutionary turn, unpredictable from its early history. Buddhist temples had to be built everywhere at the command of emperor or official. Into the temples came of course the images of Buddha and of his disciples and the representation of the legends and paradise associated with Buddhist belief. Chinese artists had never before received so much attention nor enjoyed so much demand for their work. The direct influence of Indian Buddhism on Chinese art at this period does indeed correspond to that of the Christian religion on European art in the Middle Ages. Chinese Buddhist paintings were in great vogue. The same Ku Kai-chih who produced the famous work on a Confucian subject mentioned before, was also the greatest Buddhist painter of the time according to the records. Unfortunately none of his Buddhist paintings remains for us to appreciate.

When China was once again at peace for a long period under a number of illustrious T'ang emperors from the beginning of the seventh century, Chinese Buddhist art, sculpture as well as painting, reached its highest peak, comparable to the similar development of the Italian Renaissance. The most renowned T'ang sculptor was Yang Hui-chih and the greatest of all Chinese masters was Yang's contemporary, Wu Tao-tzu. A few examples of the style of Wu's work, particularly of his frescoes, can be seen in the great museums today. Many fine examples of Buddhist paintings of the T'ang period recovered from the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas at Tunhuang are in the Stein Collection. (Plate 2 shows one of them.) Though the artists' names cannot be identified, the work shows remarkable achievement in style and colour in the manner of the great masters of the period.

From the beginning of the ninth century the spread and influence of Buddhism in China waned. It never became a state religion for China, chiefly because it was foreign. The Chinese mind had accepted it for a time in circumstances of distress. People had endeavoured to learn Sanskrit, and had studied Indian names, costumes, rituals and ceremonies. But gradually these were learned by fewer and fewer of the easy-going Chinese and the significance of the Buddhist symbols became more and more obscure. Chinese Buddhist paintings of the later periods were only looked upon as mere illustrative works for religious purposes.

The decline of the Indian Buddhist religion in China also resulted from two other factors. No matter what popularity it may have enjoyed at first, it had never ceased to be attacked by Confucianism. particularly on the issue of the Chinese family system and human relationships under THE MORAL LAW. At the same time, Taoism sneered at it, as well as the quarrels between it and Confucianism, maintaining that neither could do much to grant peace to the people unless the people were allowed to return to their own original state of being in nature. Philosophically, Taoism is close to the heart of the Chinese and provides the invisible and indescribable paradise for their soul, the germ of which is already there before it takes shape through Lao Tzu's interpretation. Slowly, as dissatisfaction with Confucianism grew and the outward ceremonies of Buddhism became burdensome, Taoism spread.

Nevertheless Buddhism has remained in China as a philosophy, for in that sphere, particularly in the non-scriptural Doctrine and Meditation, it has much in common with Taoism. The special branch of Buddhism called Ch'an or Zen Buddhism preaches by example, not by scripture, and meditates in faith. It demands no ritual or ceremony. By degrees great masters let their artistic insight dwell in this philosophy and produced fine works on Ch'an Buddhist subjects, such as Ch'an monks meditating on their faith facing a huge rock, on a lofty precipice, or in front of a stream or waterfall. Here the artists' freedom in arranging their subject-matter and their own artistic reaction was unfettered. Ch'an Buddhism inspires the artist for it brings him to the bosom of Nature, as does Taoism. Similar types of painting with Taoist scholars enjoying or identifying themselves in Nature were developed at the same time.

Taoism, then, remains as the one philosophy giving a positive and continuing stimulus to Chinese painting. While Chinese artists pursued figure-painting from Confucian subject-matter to the new inspiration from India, many Chinese men of letters who had never wholly bowed to Confucianism were soaking their minds and souls in Taoism and creating a literature about Nature. The growth of Chinese nature-poetry and later of Chinese nature-prose from the third century onwards is the fore-runner to the eventual development of Chinese nature-paintings.

The main theme in European poetry is love between humans. But Confucianism confined the Chinese emotion of love within the rigid regulation of THE MORAL LAW, while the Indian Buddhist religion denounced even the material existence of flesh and mind, let alone love. Small wonder then that the Taoist poet was pleased to turn to nature and to express an emotional love of nature, urged as he already was by Taoism to identify himself with the rhythm of all creation.

A Chinese nature-poem breathes an air of absolute and deliberate tranquillity. It is never dynamic or full of action, never rapturous nor tragic, but subtly expresses the poet's poignant and intimate feeling for the quiet beauty of nature. When the Chinese artist met obstructions to further imagination in the Indian Buddhist Religion and restrictions in Confucianism, he too turned to nature, and in the poetic mood, in an almost ecstatic vision of reality, tried to capture the forms of Nature in different garments. His eye sees and his mind conceives simultaneously, then he picks up the brush and transfers his imaginative scene to paper or silk as the poet does in a group of words. In this sense, Chinese painting is inseparable from poetry and the Chinese artist is often a poet as well. A popular phrase in China is 'Poetry is painting with sound, while painting is soundless poetry'.

The Chinese artist, like the poet, aims at identifying his soul with the subject which he works on. A bird singing and playing on a branch of lychees fruit (Plate 7), a number of different birds gathering and fluttering joyously round a small camelia tree (Plate 8), two geese at rest (Plate 5), deer grazing in the autumn woods (Plate 4), can embody his soul as well as a human figure. In this sense, the artistic representation of his subject becomes or aims at being tolerant, impartial, impersonal, perpetual and eternal.

Among all types of nature-painting, the Chinese esteem landscape painting highest. The Chinese term for landscape, Shan-shui, means mountains and water, or 'mountain-water', both words being equally important. It is not a realistic study of a certain locality but an identifiable, sympathetic representation of nature with its essential rhythm of life, of which the artist discerns the mountain and water and the space between to be the expression (Plates 9 and 10). This is in the spirit of The Eternal Law or Tao which the Chinese thinkers, poets and artists feel keeps nature working in fullness, unity and balance. Man, in such an environment, sinks to the proportions of one creature among all the hosts of nature. The oneness or the wholeness of the artist's soul cannot be better revealed and embodied than in the Chinese landscape painting. Only great masterpieces with soul-revelation remain ageless, unbound by race or creed, universal.

In China, landscape painting, together with other types of nature-painting, was developing long before its European counterpart. In the long horizontal scroll of Ku Kai-chih's famous work in the British Museum, there is a portion depicting a mountain with birds flying about disturbed by the shooting of man. It is recorded that Ku wrote an essay on landscape painting. Landscape painting may already have begun in the fourth century, but it did not ripen into full bloom until the T'ang dynasty (A.D. 618–905). Wu Tao-tzu, mentioned before as the greatest exponent of Chinese Buddhist religious paintings through his frescoes, was actually equally renowned as the greatest landscape painter. Legends of his work ring in the minds of the Chinese, laymen as well as artists. Together with his contemporaries, Li Ssu-shun and Wang Wei, he firmly established Chinese landscape painting as the purest form of soul-revelation. The masters of the Sung dynasty (A.D. 960–1276) then showed increased artistic insight into the employment of SPACE in composition. It has since been well-nigh impossible for successive generations to out-do their predecessors except in treatment of brushwork.

While stressing that Chinese painting is based on Chinese philosophical comprehension and closely linked to Chinese poetry, its debt to Chinese calligraphic technique must not be forgotten. Chinese is a syllabic, not an alphabetical, language. Each word (syllable) is represented by a simple image of the natural object it stands for or a rough sign embracing its original meaning and derivatives. Unlike the Egyptian hieroglyphs, the images were not drawn or carved in inflexible realistic forms and shapes but as mere ideographs to indicate what they represented. These ancient ideographs were constructed with only essential short lines, to be simple and easy for use, yet always in beautiful arrangements. As they were flexible, their original picture character was gradually modified into impressionistic or idealistic forms and eventually into an abstract combination of lines or strokes and dots varying in thickness at the whim of the writer.

The history of Chinese calligraphy dates back 3,000 years or more and to the Chinese their calligraphy is the purest and finest form of art. Inevitably the style of Chinese painting, in which the sculpturesque effect so evident in European painting is completely lacking, derived from it. This will explain the lack of light and shade in Chinese painting and also its special perspective. The Chinese artist does not look at the scene from eye level but composes his works from the angle which suit his calligraphic strokes and their combination. This has led to wonderful effects in outdoor scenes, particularly in the atmospheric scenery in nature. On the other hand, it has caused difficulty in the arrangement of architecture and indoor scenes. Another weak point in Chinese painting, particularly landscape painting, is the representation of clouds and sky. This is partly due to the mediums in use, which will be dealt with in a moment, but the concentration on achieving single beautiful calligraphic strokes rather than on putting a number of them close together to *mould* an effect is the chief cause.

The beauty of a calligraphic stroke in the Chinese eye lies in its *aliveness*. Just as in the process of writing a calligrapher installs a sensuous perception of the object within the framework of the square for the character, so afterwards in contemplation of it does he experience an emotional pleasure equal to that of direct contact with natural beauty. Every stroke, even every dot, suggests a form of nature. Otherwise they become dead strokes or dead dots. Not only the separate strokes but the structures of the complete words are basically inspired by nature. Similarly, the whole composition of a Chinese painting, as well as every live stroke exposes vitality and rhythm. Rhythmic vitality is the key-note of the aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy and Chinese painting. If this is achieved in a work, nothing else matters. Economy of strokes is an important element in achieving rhythmic vitality; detail and exact likeness are neglected so that the artists can concentrate on catching the spirit of the object. Consequently, Chinese painting of nature's creatures such as birds, beasts, insects, flowers, etc., is not an illustration for a scientific study. Simplicity, harmony and naturalness combine together to breathe rhythmic vitality into a masterpiece. Artificiality is the direct opposite of naturalness. Symmetry in arrangement often produces an artificial effect: and the most noticeable feature in the composition of Chinese paintings, as well as in calligraphy, is asymmetry.

The Chinese use the same brush and ink for calligraphy as for painting and the same types of paper (generally semi-absorbent) or silk. This also contributes to the distinctive look of a Chinese painting. In speaking generally of European painting, one means oil paintings done on thick canvas or wooden panel. Other types of European pictorial work are called by the material used, such as water-colours, pen-and-wash, pencil, chalk drawings, etc. Chinese artists have never worked in oils on canvas or wood. All Chinese paintings are water-colours, but they are the counterpart of European oil painting. The semi-absorbent paper or silk is made in China in different large sizes, and Chinese paintings can be as big as large European canvases or wooden panels. The close relation between Chinese painting and calligraphy may have been the reason why canvas or wooden panels were not used as media by the Chinese artist. After being painted on either soft paper or silk, a Chinese painting is always mounted on another sheet of soft paper with a silk margin in either a vertical or horizontal scroll, so that it can be rolled up and put away for storage or unrolled and hung up for inspection and appreciation from time to time. This avoids crowding the walls and prevents confusion in the onlookers' mind.

Concentrating on achieving beautiful calligraphic strokes as well as calligraphic effect in the entire piece of work, the Chinese artist finds it unnecessary to use colours. Monochrome is preferred.

Nevertheless, colours have been employed by many Chinese masters. Chinese colours are made from original minerals ground into extremely fine powder and then mixed with glue or gum solution to fix them on paper or silk. They are applied flatly with little gradation, either opaque or translucent, to leave the calligraphic strokes visible. The silk for Chinese painting is of a special kind, almost transparent before mounting, and it has a very fine smooth surface which takes ink or colour perfectly, though it is non-absorbent. If the colours to be applied are pale, one layer of each is sufficient. If they are to be rich body colours, as many as twelve layers may be necessary, carefully applied one after the other, for a blob of solid colour such as European artists can use with their oil pigments would not create the effect intended and would spoil the silk by making it shrink when the blob of colour dried.

Chinese brushes are made of various mammals' hair which can be formed to the fine point essential for our calligraphy and painting. The brush is on the whole stiffer than the European water-colour brush. Chinese ink, unlike Indian ink (it is sometimes wrongly called Indian ink), is always jet black, but becomes slightly bluish or brownish in colour when diluted with water, never really as brown as sepia. It is made in a solid stick, composed of the residue of pine or oil soot, mixed with a kind of glue (generally out of marrow bones) warmed and left to solidify. It is ground with a little water on the ink-stone. As already mentioned, Chinese paper is semi-absorbent, like western blotting paper in texture but not very porous, and it allows the ink to flow about at the artist's wish. It is mostly made of bamboo, mulberry and other wood pulps, not of rice. The Chinese artist draws and writes on this fascinating surface with great satisfaction, watching the calligraphic strokes emerge as he controls the gradation of ink under his touch. He has to be very sure of his composition in his mind and also of his strokes, in order to be able to paint quickly, otherwise the ink may smudge and run over the paper. These peculiarities of the media contribute to the distinctive look of Chinese painting.

In finding the best possible illustrations for this short introduction to Chinese painting, we have experienced great difficulties. Many more important works should take the place of some here reproduced, but they could not be made available before printing.

Nevertheless I hope I have made clear the general background and development of Chinese painting.

Editor's Note: All the plates, except Nos. 4, 6 and 10, are reproduced from original paintings in the British Museum by permission of the Trustees. No. 6 is reproduced by permission of the Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Plate 1

LADY FENG PROTECTING EMPEROR YUAN-TI FROM ATTACK BY A BEAR

Attributed to Ku Kai-chih (about A.D. 344–406)

Height: 9¾ in.

This is only one of ten parts of the famous horizontal scroll entitled 'Admonitions of the Instructress to the Ladies in the Palace' written by Chang Hua (A.D. 232–300) and painted by Ku Kai-chih a hundred years later. Each part illustrates how a Lady should behave in relation to her husband and children on a particular occasion. This part illustrates a well-known story about Lady Feng, daughter of Feng Fen-shih, a court lady in the Han Palace of Emperor Yuan-ti (reigned B.C. 48–33), who once with other court ladies followed the Emperor to the Imperial Zoological Park. Suddenly a large bear broke out of its cage and ran towards the seated Emperor. Without hesitation Lady Feng dashed in front of him to protect the Imperial Head from being attacked by the beast, while the other court ladies ran away in terror. Fortunately the imperial bodyguards rushed to the scene in time and killed the bear before it could harm Lady Feng. The Emperor admired her courage and promoted her to a higher rank among the ladies in his court. As this story implies a moral teaching, Confucian scholars of Han dynasty after the first century popularized it and it became a symbol of loyalty.

Let us examine the painting carefully:

Every figure is executed in fine, sweeping and flowing lines and it is undoubtedly the earliest example of the type of painting known later as "fine-strokes" style. Each line is even from end to end. When we realize that it is executed only by the very fine tip of the brush held just over the paper instead of being pressed on to it like the pen or pencil, we can appreciate the well-disciplined hand and its firm control of the brush. This is of course the result of years of practice in calligraphy.

Lady Feng's dash in front of the Emperor is suggested by the two long wild belts flying behind her, while the other lady's fright is indicated similarly as she runs away. The Emperor's alarm or anger is suggested by his long wide sleeves flying upwards on both sides, so that the ends of two ribbons tying his hat fly upwards too. His facial expression with slightly open mouth and slanting of the eyes emphasizes his fright but he retains the dignity of an Emperor by remaining seated as usual, though he is about to draw his dagger. Lady Feng's upward gaze suggests that she is inspired by a great urge of fearless loyalty, while the lady running away looks downwards as if she could not face the horrible sight of the beast. The mouth of one of the bodyguards fighting the beast is opened in alarm, while the other bodyguard determinedly presses his lips together. The contrast between the dark red garment of the one and the white of the other suggests the distance between them, as well as that between the dark-clad guard and Lady Feng. The Emperor is bigger than the guardsmen and also bigger than the ladies, indicating his importance. The ladies are slightly smaller than the guardsmen according to the natural proportion between man and woman. The animal has little resemblance to a bear and we can see that the artist did not possess any knowledge of bears.

An interesting point is the red colour used in this picture. It suggests that Ku Kai-chih used red pigment in the same way as he used ink, and that before the full range of ink became known, other colours were used.

The condition of this picture has long been discussed by European and Japanese scholars, some sure of its date and some doubtful. I have found uniformity of calligraphic treatment in each part of the picture, though some of the silk is mended in places and retouched owing to its age, and also uniformity in the style of the inscription which the drawing illustrates. But near the end, there is a signature of Ku Kai-chih which is smaller and different from the style of the writing of the inscriptions, very inferior in calligraphic quality and composition. It may be that a part of the picture was lost and someone later added a new signature on behalf of the artist. The signature is certainly not by the same man who wrote the inscription and did the painting. To my mind, this picture is a later copy, but by a good artist of a hundred years or so after Ku Kai-chih's death, say about the sixth century. Whether copy or not it shows how much Chinese artists had already achieved in those early days.

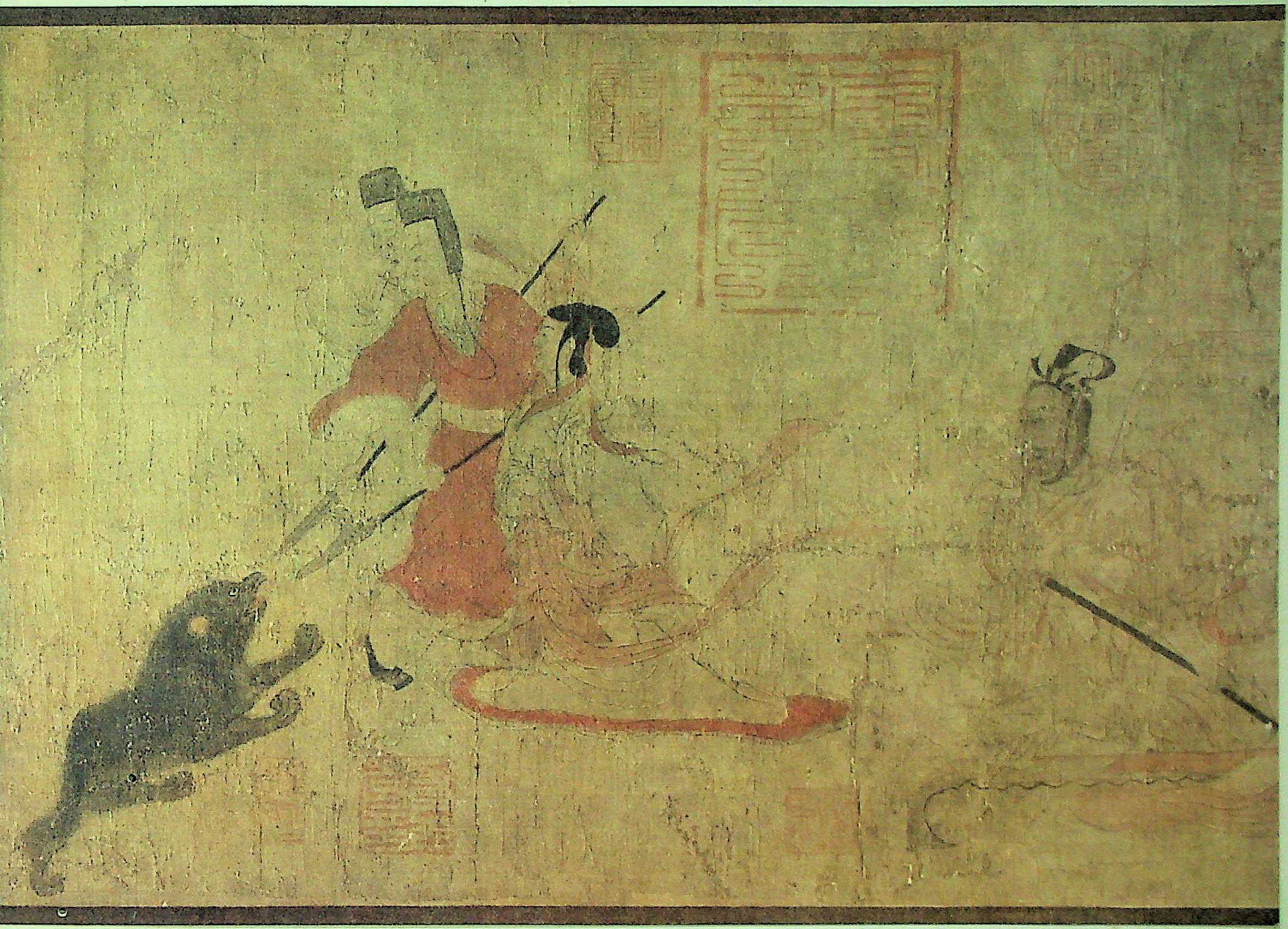

Plate 2

VAISRAVANA CROSSING THE OCEAN

T'ang dynasty (A.D. 618–905) Size: 2 ft. 2 in. × 2 ft. ½ in.

Found at Tun-huang in 1908 by Sir Aurel Stein

Dr. Arthur Waley describes this picture as 'Vaisravana crossing the ocean. Vaisravana gallops to the right on a white horse. He wears long close-fitting coat of armour composed of interlaced thongs of leather . . . . At the rear stand the dragon-king and his wife, looking entirely human and secular; the king wears a high mitre and carries a sceptre—the queen is in tenth-century Chinese costume. Above is the palace of the dragon-king. . . . In the water float infants. . . . Behind the monster (or possibly riding on it) is the figure of a lady offering flowers on a dish. She must be Sri-Devi who plays so important a part in the Vaisravana Sutra. On the cliffs appears a black deer.'

The picture is reproduced here chiefly to show the wonderful freshness of its colours.

From the third century Indian Buddhism was taking firm root in Chinese soil. In T'ang dynasty, the golden age of China's history, when Chinese literature and art were fully developed, the influence of Buddhism reached its height as well. Tun-huang, the nearest point to India on the extreme western frontier of China, became the centre of pilgrimage for Chinese Buddhists and a series of Buddhist monasteries and temples, hollowed out of massive cliffs, were built there, adorned with enormous and countless sculptures, depicting Buddha, his life story, his disciples and teachings. These sculptures, carved on the rock inside and outside the caves, have survived to be the chief witness to the Chinese culture of that period. The life story of Buddha and other stories mentioned in all Buddhist sutras were also painted in frescoes and on silk and paper. As mentioned in the introduction, Ku Kai-chin of the fourth century and Wu Tao-tzu of T'ang were the two greatest Buddhist painters in the history of Chinese pictorial art. But not all the Chinese Buddhist paintings in existence to-day have come from great masters' hands. In T'ang dynasty the demand for pictures on any popular Buddhist subjects to be used in temples as hanging banners or as offerings from the pilgrims was so great that few artists could easily meet it; they had to resort to doing the design, which was then copied repeatedly by artisans and those who could just paint. In the end the copy would be quite unlike the original design. I think the picture reproduced is such a copy and that this accounts for its rather confused composition.

The chief character, Vaisravana, dominates the whole picture. His retinue, including a number of demon-like human creatures whom he has converted, occupies the second place in our attention. The whole party is supported by the rolling clouds and the picture shows enough movement to indicate that they are crossing over land and sea towards the right. The exact meaning has been lost in measure as the Buddhist religion has ceased to play a significant part in Chinese daily life.

Nevertheless, we can learn a great deal from this picture:

During the T'ang dynasty, India and China had a fuller interchange of culture than before or since. Indian art undoubtedly gave new inspiration to the minds of Chinese artists. Yet if we compare this picture with the traditional type of Indian sculpture at Sanchi and paintings at Ajanta, we find very little resemblance in facial structure and bodily arrangement. There is no soft swelling curve of breast and hip in the female figures, nor sensuous and exuberantly rhythmical body-movement in any of the characters. Even the demon-like creatures are scarcely semi-naked. The deep-rooted moral teaching of Confucianism obviously caused the subtle transformation of the Indian story into the Chinese idiom of design.

From this picture we can see that Chinese figure painting had developed a step further since Ku Kai-chih's day. The figures have become more exact, with detailed decorations on draperies and head-dresses. They are more realistic in movement than before. Though the picture reproduced is a copy by a second-rate or third-rate artist, each linear arrangement is intended to be solid and purposeful in support of the original design.

The composition of the picture seems to aim at a fuller use of space. At least we note that every bit of space is filled with some design or detail. It is interesting to note that this picture based on an Indian story, though not Indian in style and technique, is somewhat influenced by Indian composition as regards the use of space.

The amazing part of this picture is its colour—each colour pigment, including the gold, is still fresh and perfect—after being painted more than a thousand years ago. Very few masterpieces of T'ang dynasty have been found still in existence and this picture, together with many others in the Stein Collection in the British Museum, gives an idea of what had been achieved by the Chinese artists in those days. The treatment of colour has never been surpassed in any later period.

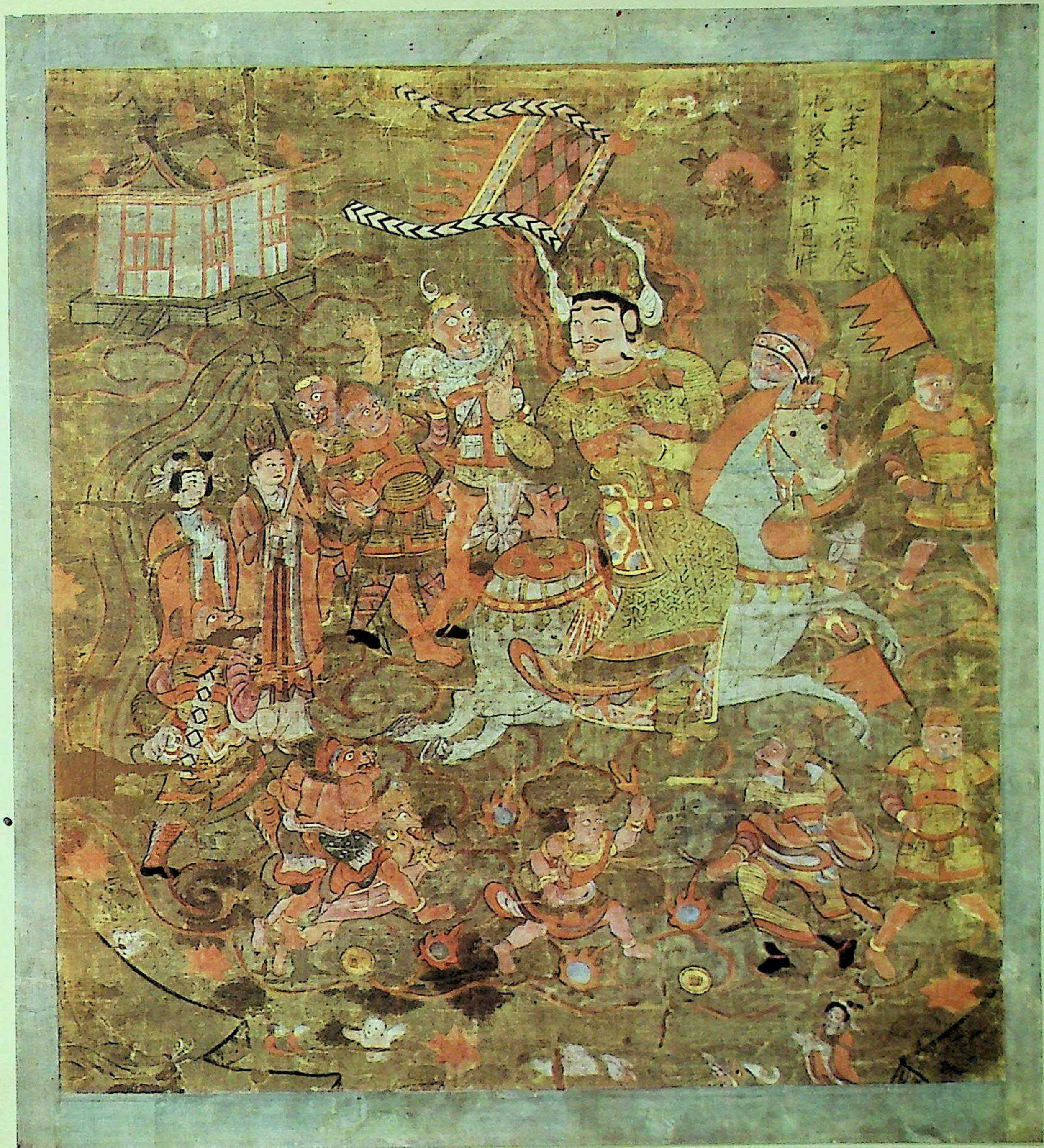

Plate 3

LADY FENG PROTECTING EMPEROR YUAN-TI FROM ATTACK BY A BEAR

Artist unknown. Sung dynasty (A.D. 960–1276)
Height: 20½ in.

The subject-matter of this painting, a portion of which on the left-hand side has not been reproduced, is the same as that of Plate 1 and again illustrates the symbol of loyalty in Confucianism. I have included it to show how the artists of two different periods treated the same subject-matter. By comparing this with Plate 1, we see the development of Chinese figure painting from a simple design to an elaborate one in the fine-stroke style.

Though there is no signature on this work, the composition and fine brush-strokes and colour technique betray a mature Sung artist. It follows closely the practice of T'ang artists, as shown in Plate 2, to make the figures more exact, more realistic in the pictorial sense of proportion and its composition also aims at a fuller use of space. But if we examine the fine brush-strokes carefully, they tend to have more bends and folds which display suppleness and gracefulness rather than sturdiness and solidity. These strokes have a special name 'Silk-string', unlike those employed in Plates 1 and 2 which are called 'Iron-wire strokes'. We can easily distinguish in actuality between wire and silk, so we may feel the different strength of these two types of strokes.

This goes to say that there is plenty of action and charming arrangement in this painting though its delicate rendering is not altogether suitable to the subject-matter. Nevertheless, the minuteness of the fine designs on the robes, of the foliage, on the balustrades, etc., does not seem to break the unity but rather to heighten the harmony of the whole picture. The emperor, moving down from his seat, rather perturbed yet dignified, seems to be astonished at the unexpected appearance of the intruder. Lady Feng's figure is full of gracefulness but it lacks any hint of heroic vigour, while her facial expression is also too reposeful. The restrictions of Confucianism on showing emotion in public imposed even more pressure on women than on men, therefore artists were apt to content themselves with a somewhat static and stylized representation of the female face and figure and we find little variety between one and another since the Sung period.

All the facial expressions of the male figures in this painting are admirable; they show a close link with the technique of T'ang artists in Buddhist religious paintings. One of the guards engaged in fighting the beast displays good movement, yet he does not suggest chivalrous action as he and the other one (not shown in this Plate) might have done if depicted by a European master. As regards the healthy-looking court minister in his black robe, the artist must be poking fun at him for running behind the royal seat while the delicate, slender-featured Lady Feng steps forward to face the issue. The detail of trees and furniture balances the figures in their finely-drawn robes. The colours, applied lightly or heavily according to their respective function, are superb, and the general colour scheme gives an unusual atmosphere of harmony, though the silk on which the work is executed has turned a little too dark to show them to advantage.

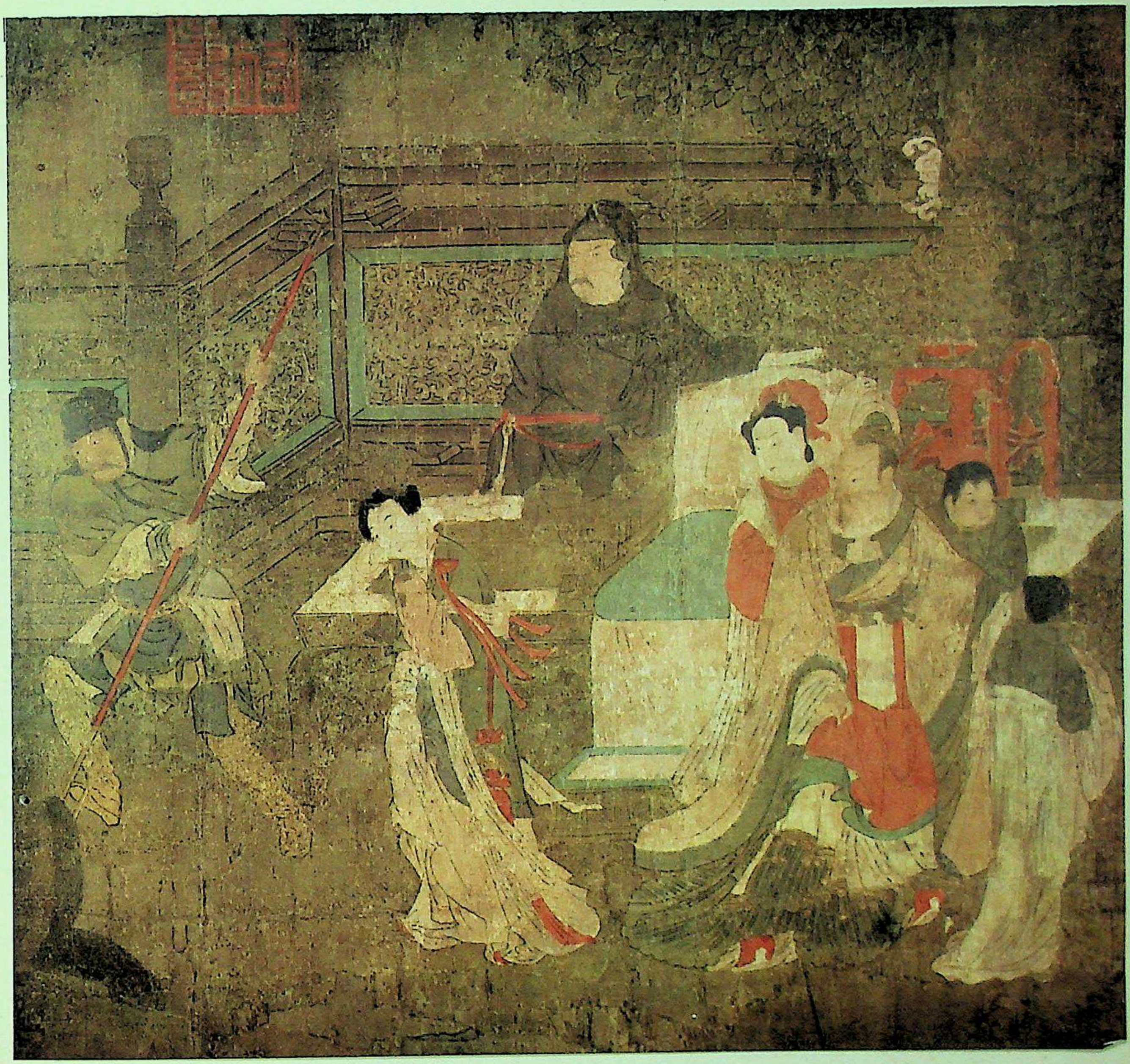

Plate 4

A HERD OF DEER IN A FOREST IN AUTUMN

Artist unknown. Five dynasties (A.D. 907–960)
Chinese Palace Museum, Peking

The composition of this painting covers almost every bit of the silk on which it is executed. It may seem at first glance rather unlike most of the well-known Chinese masterpieces, yet it represents the development in the Five dynasties from the T'ang period, when Chinese Buddhist religious paintings reached their peak. The early Buddhist paintings had made full use of the space on the paper or silk (see Pl. 2). This painting bears also a hint of Persian artistic arrangement as seen in Persian miniatures. Though it is not certain what typical Persian painting looked like from the sixth to ninth centuries, it is known that many Persians and Turks came to China's capital at Chang-an in the T'ang dynasty. They probably brought with them their own art or some type of Mesopotamian art and they may have impressed the Chinese artist's mind. Nevertheless, if we examine this painting carefully, we can see that in treatment and aesthetic arrangement it is purely Chinese in its wholesome naturalness. In the first instance, the age and size of this painting deny any connection with the Persian miniatures, which spring from the twelfth century if not later and the size of which are never more than 30 cm. by 40 cm. In this painting there is no religious flavour breathing through its formal, ceremonious manner, nor is there any significant symmetrical arrangement of trees, animals, etc., as in Persian works of art.

The Plate here reproduced is only a larger portion of the work, not the whole. The original painting has a height of 118·1 cm. and width of 63·7 cm. The bottom part, which is not reproduced, shows another deer, a male one, lifting its head and moving up towards the female, which is looking down in the right-hand corner. Another female standing behind the one just mentioned is very alert, as if keeping watch on the movement of the stag, which, though stepping away towards the left, has its ears erected and its eyes wide-open trying to hear what is going on. Three other females are sitting in different poses but at perfect ease with their heads facing the right, while another female is licking her hind leg and another one moving away behind the trees towards the top left corner. Though they are scattered, each deer is aware of the others.

There are many legends about the deer in Chinese ancient books. It is said to be able to live more than a thousand years, therefore it symbolizes long life. It has become a more favoured subject for Chinese artists both because of its symbolic significance and because of its beautifully-proportioned body and graceful legs. The artist who painted this painting shows his keen observation of nature and of the movements and mannerisms of deer. Each tree is depicted in full foliage in minute detail, full of natural charm and gracefulness. The colours applied thickly in many layers retain their freshness. The dark red behind pink, which again is behind white and then the dark green in the foreground represent the depth of an autumn forest very well indeed. This painting is the best and the earliest example of Chinese natural pictorial art in existence.

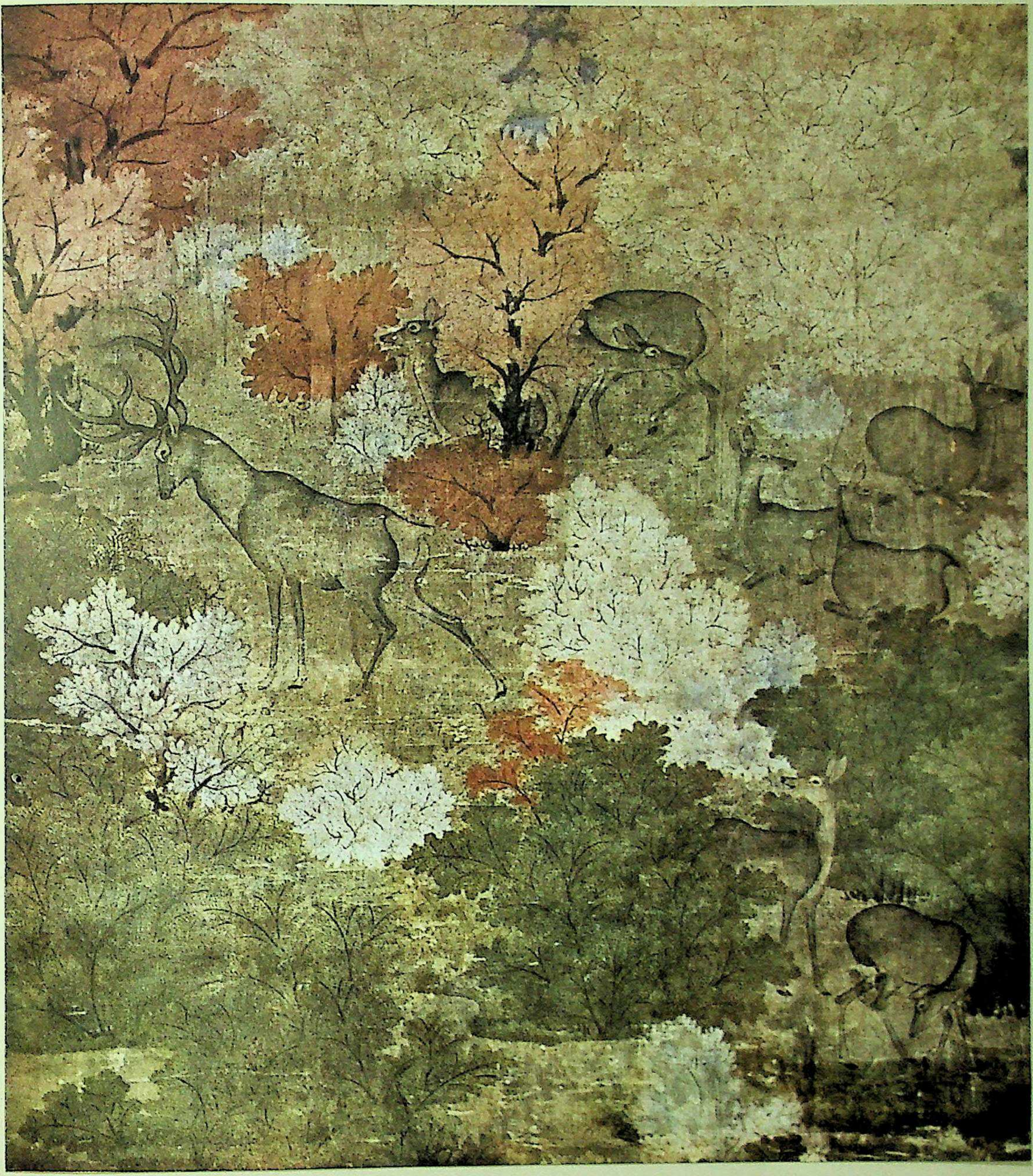

Plate 5

TWO GEESE

Artist unknown. Sung dynasty (A.D. 960–1276)
Width: 25¼ in.

This is reproduced from a long vertical scroll. As there is nothing but empty space above and only a single line down below with a few strokes for grass (unfortunately not clearly shown in the reproduction) at the left bottom corner, the reposeful attitude of the geese creates an even stronger atmosphere of peace. *Space* plays a great part in Chinese paintings since Sung period and follows the principle of simplification. Economy of strokes is an important element; other details are neglected so that the artist can concentrate on catching the spirit of the object. We can see how the artist who painted this painting had concentrated his mind's eye on catching the spirit of the geese. Each of the birds is carefully outlined with simple but sure strokes and coloured with layers of white pigment to give them bodily significance against the silk. How well-fed they look! The depth between the geese is well marked by the black mark on the head of the goose lying in the foreground together with its few black feathers. What a sure touch was needed to make these few black marks bring life into the work! We must not belittle the importance of their earthen-red beaks and their pale-yellow eyes, which have their share in the life of the picture. The eyes of both geese are open, indicating that they are not drowsy nor tired after their morning round in the pond and also that it is a fine spring noon or evening and not hot summer afternoon which would have driven them to sleep. Though open, their eyes are not fixed on anything in particular as if to say that they are quite content with their life at the moment. Nothing would induce them to bestir themselves to peck! How different an attitude from the greediness and many desires of man! The artist must have been absorbed in an intense mental study and concentration before his brush was applied to the silk. Most Chinese paintings breathe some philosophical allusion and correspond to the lyric element in poetry in their rhythmical expression of emotion. Looking at this painting we gain a sense of peacefulness and tranquillity.

Besides the carefully-worked designs of the geese, only a single calligraphic stroke is added right close to the one in the foreground to suggest the bank of a pond and that the geese are lying carefreely by the shore of the pond. The pond may be quite a big one, the other side not visible owing to the large size of the birds occupying the major portion of the silk. Or it may be a very small pond with not much water in it and with plenty of grass, little wild flowers and shrubs and trees. Whatever it may be is left to the imagination of the onlooker. The artist has embodied his life and soul in the object which he intends to depict and nothing more is necessary. He emphasizes the important parts and omits the less important ones which may prove a nuisance. The development in the use of *Space* is the greatest achievement of the Sung masters and it has become the most characteristic feature of Chinese pictorial art known to the world.

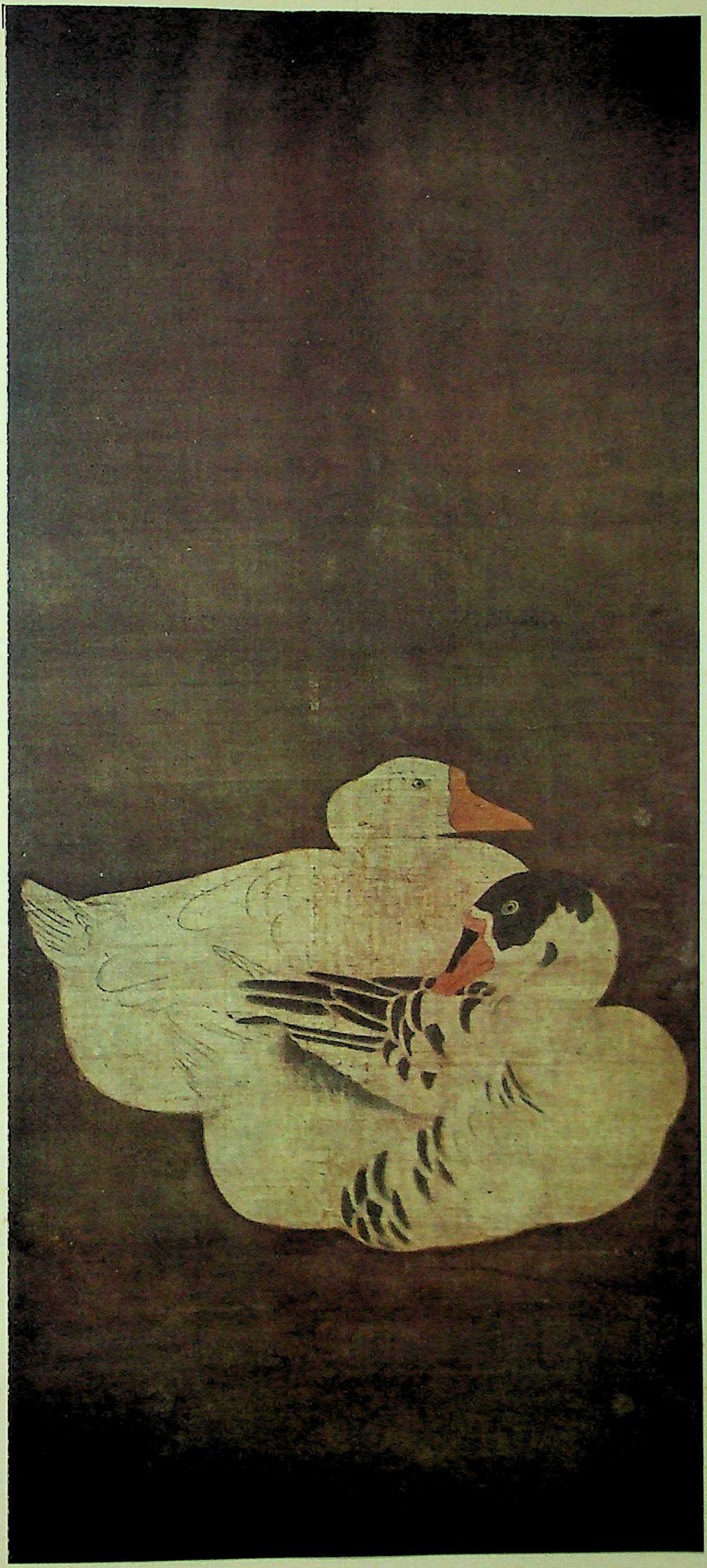

Plate 6

FEEDING HORSES

By Jen Jen-fa or Yueh-shan Tao-jen. Yuan dynasty (A.D. 1277–1367)

Size: 21.5 in. × 29.75 in.

Victoria and Albert Museum

The composition of this painting shows the inside of a stable with two red poles joined by a long thick rope to which the reins of three horses are tied. Underneath the rope is a huge wooden trough. A groom dressed in red is stirring the food which he has just put into the trough. Two of the horses, one orange and the other white, are feeding greedily, while the third horse, a dark brown one, lifts its head as if in scorn, judging by the tilt of its nose. Perhaps there is not much food left in the trough. Another groom in yellow is entering on the right with more food. This everyday subject is painted on silk with slight use of colours.

The horse has been one of the favourite animal subjects for Chinese artists since very early days. Its noble appearance and suggestion of strength and suppleness of movement appeals to us as to the western artists. Chinese horses carved in stone and jade as well as made in pottery are to be seen in great museums. The most famous horse-artist of all our history was Han Kan of the T'ang dynasty. The Emperor of his day, Hsuan Tsung, is said to have had forty thousand horses in his stable. One day the emperor asked Han Kan: 'Who trained you to paint the horse so well?' 'Ah, my masters are all in Your Majesty's stable!' came the answer. This indicates that early Chinese artists spent endless time in observing from nature and sketching in their mind, though they did not actually spread out the paper and make the sketches directly. Li Kung-lin or 'Sleeping Dragon' Li was renowned as the greatest horse-painter of Sung period, while Chao Meng-fu and Jen Jen-fa were the outstanding names in Yuan dynasty. Jen Jen-fa is second to Chao Meng-fu. The painting reproduced here is an example of Jen's work. Unfortunately after Yuan and early Ming dynasties Chinese artists paid more attention to calligraphic treatment and technique, copying early masters' work and composition, and began to neglect their daily practice of observing nature, particularly nature's creature. There is no Chinese horse-painter of note in Ming, nor in Ching period (A.D. 1644–1911) except Lan Shih-ning who was an Italian.

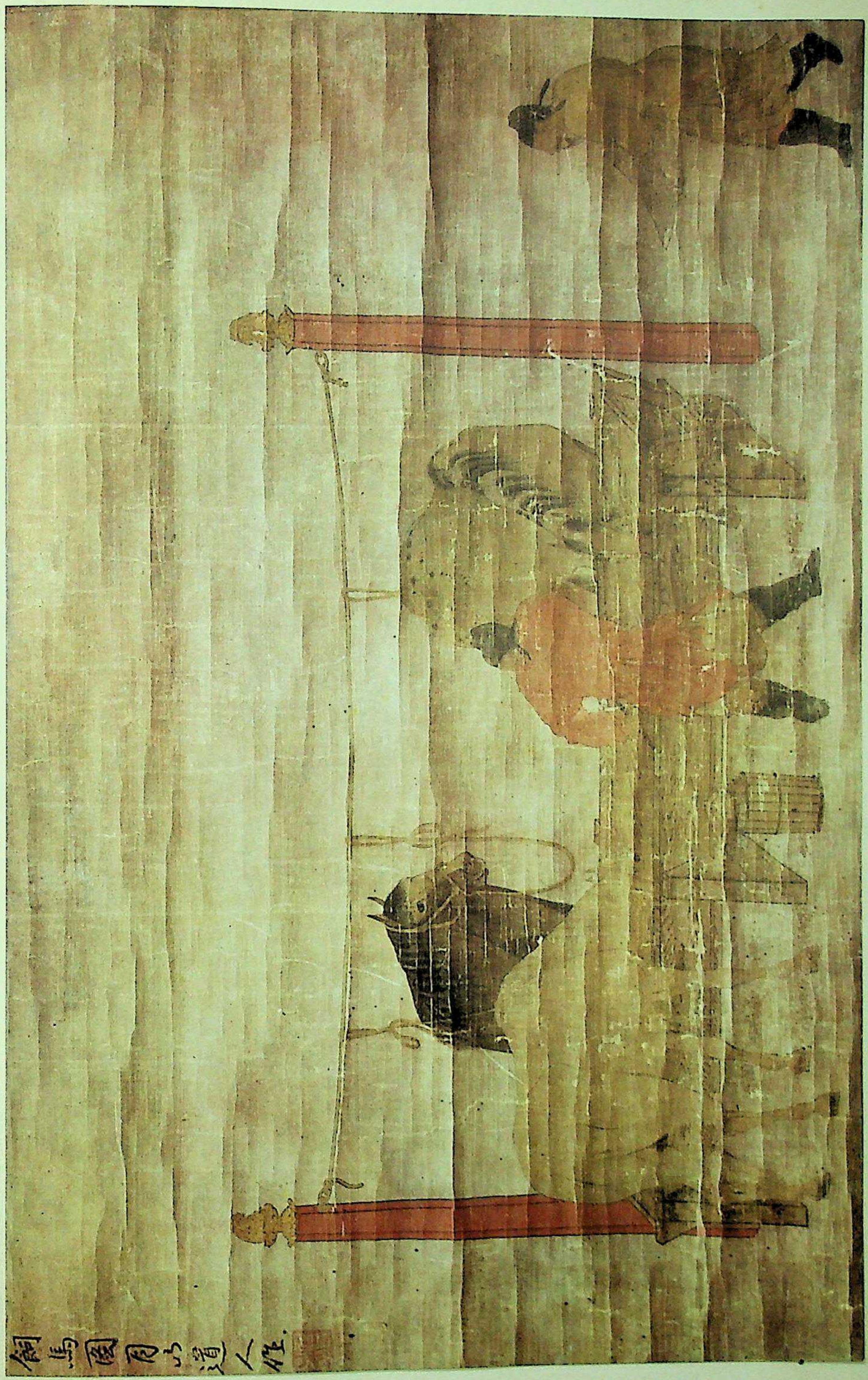
飼馬圖月山道人作

Plate 7

BIRDS AND LYCHEES

Artist unknown. Ming dynasty (A.D. 1368–1643)

The painting reproduced here is only a part of a long horizontal scroll, the height of which is 20 cm. It represents four birds happily perched on different small branches of a lychee tree, singing or pecking insects in natural fashion. Only the upper part of the tree is shown with its branches spreading wide to cover the expanse of the long scroll. At one place it is thickly covered with foliage and fruit and at another only thinly. The entire composition of the work is natural and pleasing. One biggish bird, maybe a Chinese ring-necked bulbul, *Pycnonotus Sinensis Sinensis*, sings joyously on a branch above a white flower and a big bunch of lychee fruits is hanging on another branch behind it. The shells of each purple lychee are carefully worked out by the arrangement of different purple dots—the result being a remarkably real round ball-like effect almost photographic, which is rather unusual in early Chinese artistic treatment. The painting is done on silk.

Lychee is a special Chinese fruit growing abundantly in Kuangtung Province and some parts of Szechuan and Fukien and it has been regarded as the greatest delicacy among all fruits in China since the fourth century if not earlier. The great T'ang poet, Po Chu-i, once wrote an essay on this particular fruit discussing its colour and taste in most alluring terms. When the tree is fully grown, it looks like a chestnut tree, but rather smaller, with its thick foliage forming a canopy at the top. Its leaf is like that of laurel, though maybe smaller and slenderer, and its flower resembles that of orange blossom. It blooms in April and May and bears fruit in June and July. The fruit has a thin outer shell, purplish red in colour when mature, covering the thick soft white flesh round the biggish dark-brown stone in the centre. This mutton-fat-jade coloured flesh is so delicate in texture that it melts in the mouth like snow without being chewed much and has a sweet fragrant elusive taste unlike that of other fruit. Many great Chinese poets have written about it. A well-known story tells how lychees were collected and sent from south China to the north, some thousand miles in distance and had to be kept as fresh as if just picked from the tree to please the palate of Yang Kuei-fei, the most renowned beauty in Chinese history and the beloved of the Emperor, Hsuan Tsung, who reigned between A.D. 713 and 762. Yang Kuei-fei was born in Szechuan and had loved eating lychees when she was a child. The Emperor ordered the fruits to be sent to his court in less than seven days. It would be easy today, but in the early eighth century it involved the messengers in constant changing of horses along a thousand-mile rough road. Only a powerful emperor could give such a command, but who could count how many people and horses sacrificed their lives under his tyranny?

A number of Sung artists are said to have chosen lychee for their subject-matter but none of their work remains today.

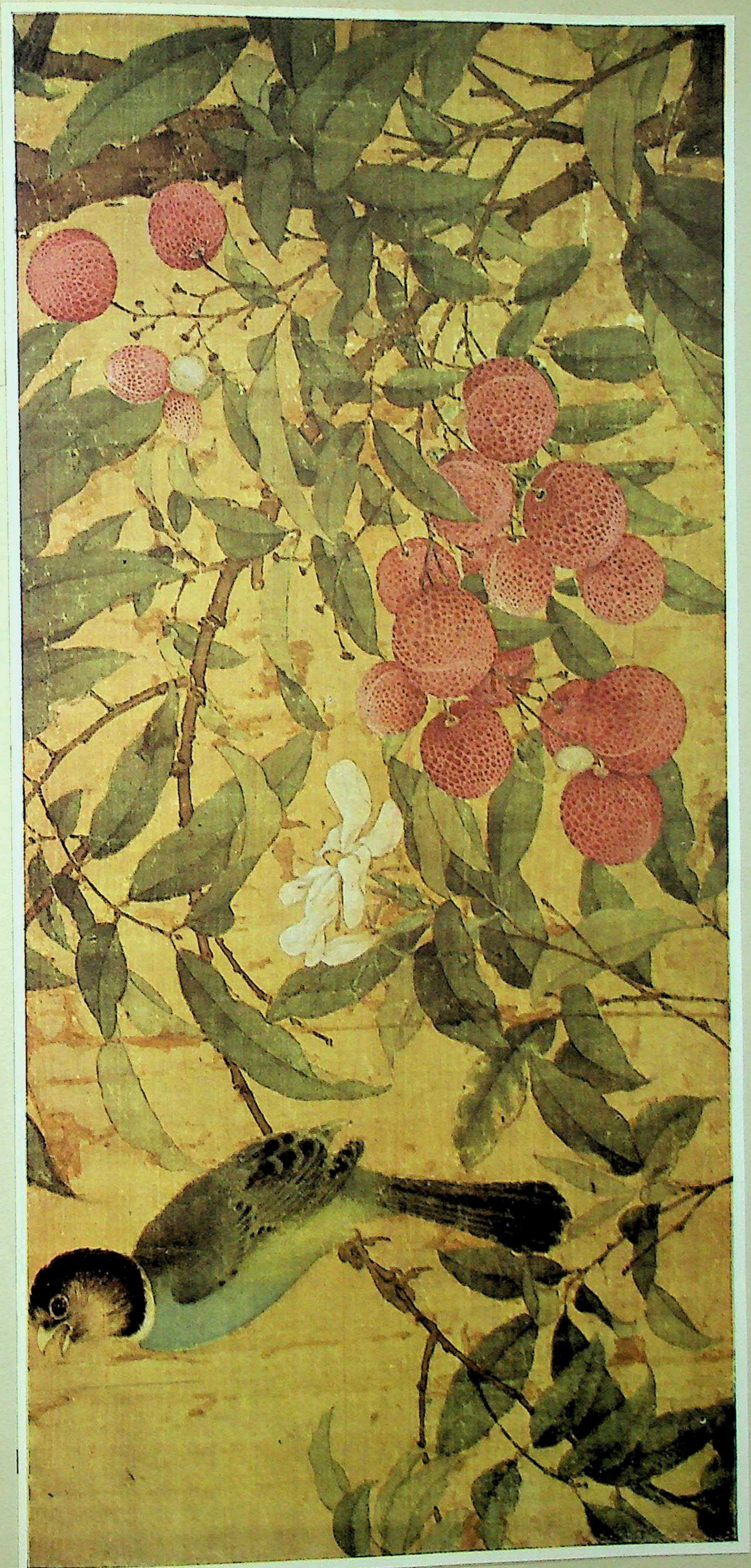

Plate 8

BIRDS, FLOWERS AND ROCKS

By Wang Wu. Signed and dated: in a spring month in the Jen Yin year in the Kang Hsi period (A.D. 1662)

66 × 39 in.

This is a fairly typical Chinese bird-and-flower painting. A camelia tree in full bloom stands by a biggish rock, behind which grow some healthy-looking hollyhocks with pink, red, and white flowers. Two thrushes are singing or making signs to each other on the upper branches while one of the two big ring-necked Chinese bulbuls is turning a sort of somersault to catch something, the other singing loudly as if to provide music for the show. A blue kingfisher perches on a small twig on the left side of the trunk, almost invisible yet adding enough colour to break the whites and reds, and also indicating depth. Two pheasants, one of which has white feathers on its back and tail, are carefully drawn in detail eagerly pecking in the grass, among which grow some tiny white flowers here and there close to some small rocks. This painting is well-composed and the colours are very pleasing.

Wang Wu was a noted artist of the seventeenth century, who made himself known as a great follower of the Sung masters in his landscape painting, but most of the works by him which now exist are bird-and-flower paintings.

This painting came to the British Museum from the Eumorfopoulos Collection.

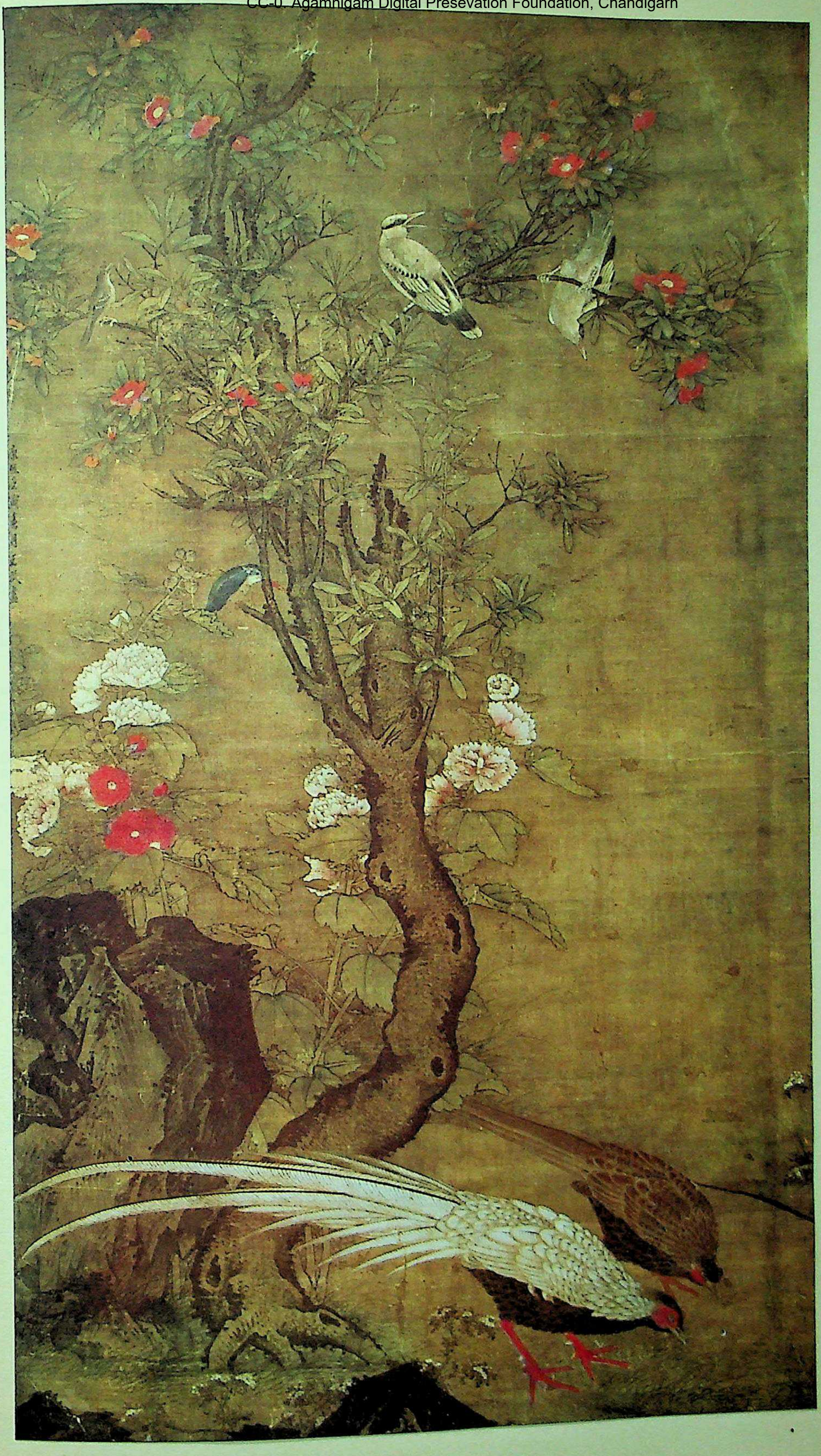

Plate 9

BOATING THROUGH THE GENTLE BREEZE OR BY MOONLIGHT

Attributed to Ma Yuan (about thirteenth century)

69½ × 33 in.

An old fisherman with a fishing rod
By the cliffs or in the bay
Comes and goes in his lonely boat, unconstrained.
Seagulls are dotted on the shore and the light waves fade in the distance.
The whispering of the bulrushes makes the sunny day seem cool.
I sing loudly as the sunset indicates the late hour.
Of a sudden a golden shadow trembles in the waves,
Lifting my head I see the moon rising over the eastern hills.

The above rough translation of a well-known seventeenth century Chinese song seems to describe aptly the feeling one gets from looking at the painting here reproduced. But the person who sits with his books meditating on the natural scenery in the bow of the boat is a scholar-poet, not an old fisherman with a fishing rod. The boatman in the stern does not seem to be doing more than letting the boat drift along and keeping a close watch on the servant in the middle who is preparing a meal or unpacking food. The top of the cliffs is shown, but the bay and the seagulls dotted on the shore are veiled in the evening mist, which hides the light waves in the distance. We can hear the whispering of the few bulrushes shaking their heads in the foreground at the right bottom corner, and the rippling of the river. The moon is undoubtedly rising over the eastern hills but it cannot be seen within the frame of the painting. That is not necessary. The head of the scholar-poet slightly lifted towards the sky indicates the transcendent loftiness of his feeling and mood. The depth and absolute tranquillity of this painting is achieved by the simplified composition and sparse detail. There is much expressive space in it.

Hsia Kuei and Ma Yuan are two great Sung masters. Between them they launched a new school, that is the Northern School, for Chinese landscape painting, by boldly choosing a freer conception with more powerful and less numerous strokes and by making full use of space in the composition. No other art in the world has used empty space, making it a positive factor in the design with such felicity as is shown in this painting here reproduced.

The brushwork of this painting is more in the style of Ma Yuan than Hsia Kuei, though the former always painted with an absolutely sure touch in his calligraphic strokes, which is missing in the few bulrushes at the right bottom corner of this painting. There is no signature on the painting and it is attributed to Ma Yuan. An article on it was written by Dr F. R. Martin in the Burlington Magazine, where it was reproduced in colours, Vol. XLIII, p. 257. Its height is 149 cm. and width 80·4 cm.

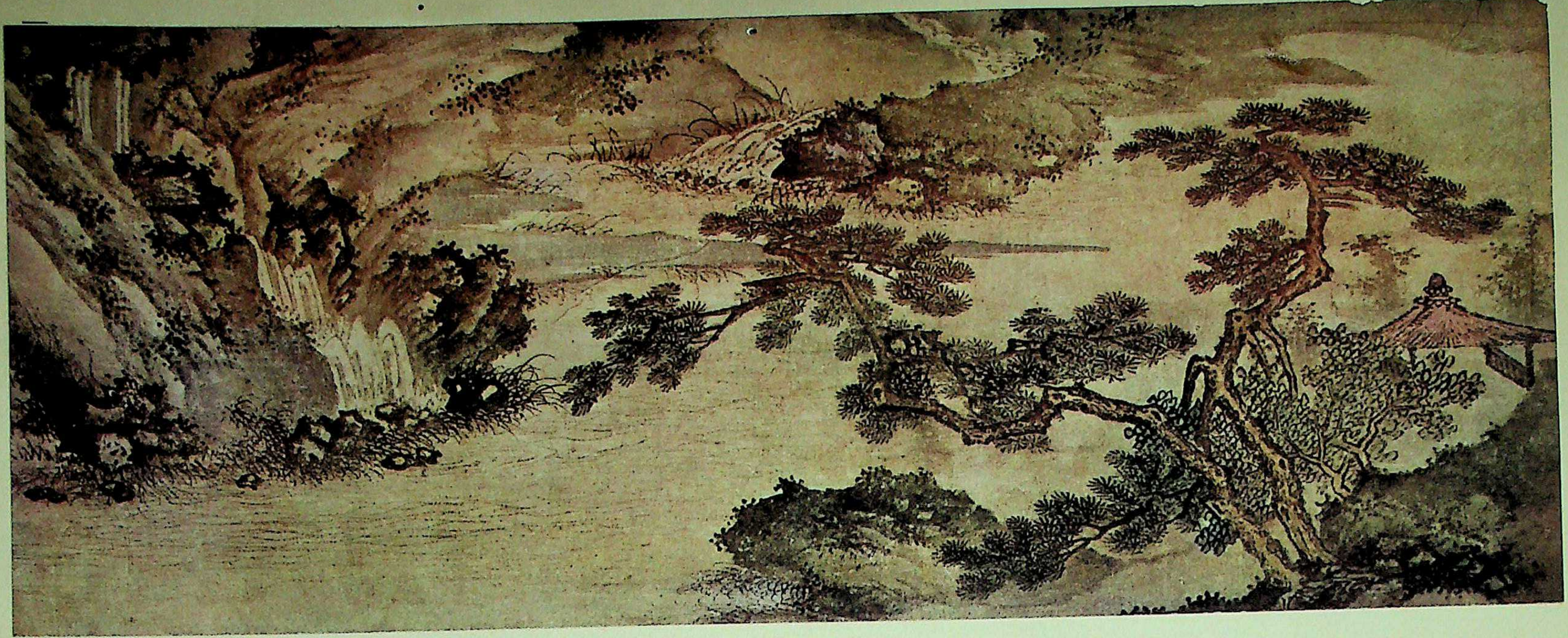

Plate 10. A PORTION OF A LANDSCAPE

By Tai Chin. Ming dynasty (A.D. 1368–1643) Height: 8½ in.

This is reproduced from a long horizontal scroll painted on Chinese paper in ink with slight use of colour. Two large pine trees stand on the rocky shore of the river at the right side of the foreground, while the cliffs, trees and particularly the waterfalls with small rocks dotted nearby are in a lighter tone, showing a wonderful misty effect. The other larger portion of this scroll, which cannot be reproduced here, shows a biggish boat with its crew which has just managed to pass through the rather rugged part of the river close to the waterfalls to reach the peaceful, wild flowing stretch. A Chinese landscape painting is often on a long horizontal scroll with a whole range of mountains and hills as well as the waterside of the river included. The artist does not pick out a small section of natural scenery that he sees and likes but depicts the varied formations along the same river or through the same mountain range, combined together into one single wholeness. This cannot be done directly from nature but it is done by continually observing the beautiful forms in Nature bit by bit and time after time. The power of composing so many varied scenes into one wholeness requires, of course, good taste, and good taste has to be cultivated. Only a great master can give the spontaneous continuity and control the multiplicity unerringly.

In this painting the calligraphic strokes which build up each object such as the trees, rocks, waterfalls, the ripples of the moving water and the boat with its crew attending to their respective jobs, are clear, sure and aesthetically striking. The theme and composition of the work present a harmonious natural scene, which one seems to recall. The slight colours applied on the trunk of the pine and its needles as well as on the boatmen, etc., add life to the whole composition.

Tai Chin was known as a great landscape master of Ming dynasty and an ardent follower of Ma Yuan and Li Tang in style. His achievement was not confined to landscape. He also did figure, portrait, bird and animal paintings and when he painted his figures he created a new style of stroke—or if not exactly new, an innovation from the orchid-leaf stroke—for the draperies. As his name became better known, he was summoned to the Imperial Court to receive honour and carry out some work. Unfortunately a big name always invites jealousy and enmity. He presented His Majesty with a landscape entitled 'A Lonely Fisherman on an Autumn River'. But the fisherman was wearing a deep red robe, and as the royal advisers (moved by jealousy) pointed out—this colour indicated the dress of a certain rank of official; and how could an official be fishing in his uniform? 'Very true', remarked the Emperor, and Tai Chin was immediately dismissed from court. He died eventually in poverty. But what a shallow artistic taste the emperor must have had!

This painting is one of the best examples of Tai Chin's work.

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